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ABSTRACT

Rereading the history of basic writing can serve as a context for and a springboard to a reading of selected contemporary basic writing textbooks. For critical scrutiny, articles by Joseph Harris and David Bartholomae offer retellings of the history of basic writing, retellings that challenge the more "heroic" tellings that have become part of the basic writing teaching experience. Because little training on either practical or theoretical levels exists for college teachers of basic writing, many teachers turn to textbooks for guidance and method. The textbook becomes the authority, and how success and progress occur is reflected in the textbook. Accordingly, six textbooks with diverse approaches were selected for examination. The textbooks define their audience ("fear of error" is the most common characteristic) and describe success on the local level of the student's experience with the textbooks themselves. For some textbooks, successful students will find pleasure in becoming a writer, for others success is writing skill, and still others equate success with empowerment. In fact, success for basic writing students in these textbooks may be perceived in terms of skills versus empowerment. In the future, basic writing courses and textbooks need to be designed and written so that they produce a narrative of the intellectually, developmentally, cognitively, and emotionally capable and, most importantly, literate adult. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

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ED 399 550

And They Wrote Happily Ever After:

The Nature of Basic Writing As Portrayed in Textbooks

Donna Dunbar-Odom

The rhetoric of empowerment and progress is nowhere more evident than in the field of basic writing. Its current metaphorical manifestation appeared in the 1996 Conference on Composition and Communication's theme of "transcending boundaries." Of the dozen sessions devoted to basic writing, virtually all offered variations on this theme. As it is represented in conferences and journals, one would think that basic writing is truly on the cutting edge. The general consensus tends to hold that the development of basic writing has been a consistently progressive movement toward better practices, theories, and pedagogy. However, recent critiques have called this progressive model into question and invite us to rethink how we see the history of basic writing and where it has taken us. The nature of these critiques offers us both a sense of the current state of the field as well as how it got here. In this essay I want to use these current rereadings to provide a context for and springboard to a reading of selected contemporary basic writing textbooks in the light of these critiques.

Almost twenty years have passed since the publication of Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* in 1977. Almost thirty years have passed since the first days of CUNY's experiment with open admissions. And exactly thirty years have passed since the Dartmouth Seminar. The impact these events had on the formation and development of basic writing has come to be seen as a given. The Dartmouth Seminar brought together English educators from the U.S. and Great Britain in order to come to a consensus about how best to approach and carry out the teaching of English. In "After Dartmouth: Growth and Conflict in English," Joseph Harris characterizes the "heroic" view of the event and its result: "An old model of teaching centered on the transmission of skills (composition) and knowledge (literature) gave way to a 'growth model' focusing on the experience of students and how these are shaped by their uses of language" (631). However, Harris argues that the "growth model" has had little real effect on everyday teaching practices, which continue largely as before, "marching lockstep to the demands of fixed school curriculums, standardized tests, and calls for improved skills and increased cultural unity" (632). He also argues that this metaphor is inadequate to the task of describing learning and "thus offer[s] a limited view of what is at stake (and what can be gained) in learning to read and write at a university" (643). Dartmouth's contribution to the field is valuable, but, according to Harris, has offered more to conferences and journals than to students.

The *Journal of Basic Writing*'s Spring 1993 issue was devoted to the 4th National Basic Writing Conference Plenaries. The lead article, David Bartholomae's "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum," continues the critique of progress and empowerment as Bartholomae expresses his concern over basic writing's having "begun to seem like something naturally, inevitably, transparently there in the curriculum" (8). His concern deepens as he speculates that we, as basic writing educators, have institutionalized basic writing to the extent that we can no longer imagine its absence. He writes:

> It was once a provisional, contested term, marking an uneasy accommodation between the institution and its desires and a student body that did not or would not fit. I think it should continue to mark an area of contest, of struggle, including a struggle against its stability or inevitability. (8)

Within this context, then, Mina Shaughnessy's contribution gets read as the "quintessential liberal reflex" as *Errors and Expectations* provides a powerful and extended demonstration of basic writing students' prose as exhibiting error born from a "logic" which she reveals and of how basic writing students want, not to disrupt the mainstream, but to become a part of it. Bartholomae challenges us to try to call our definitions of basic writing into question by no longer seeing the basic writing student's presence in the basic writing classroom as inevitable, by no longer seeing the basic writing student in light of her deficiency. Ultimately, he even challenges us to play with the criteria that determine placement in basic writing and to refigure what basic writing could look like as a result.

Basic writing appears to be secure enough to withstand critical scrutiny of its institutional status from within its own ranks. This scrutiny reveals more gaps between common assumptions about the results of basic writing's key historical moments and what we see taking place in the classroom. Briefly, I want to address the gaps that others like David Bartholomae in "The Tidy House," and Joseph Harris in "After Dartmouth" have revealed by rereading basic writing's history in light of contemporary institutional realities. Harris and Bartholomae offer retellings of basic writing's history, retellings that challenge the more "heroic" tellings that have become part of the basic writing teaching experience. I want to offer another "unheroic" history, a much smaller history as a means to tell one story of textbooks and a version of how they are used.

When I was hired in the early 1980s to teach basic writing at an open admissions university, my qualifications were that I had taught as a teaching assistant and part-time instructor at another state university where I had received an M.A. in Twentieth-Century American Literature. As a teaching assistant, I taught in an "individualized" program that broke writing down into "modules"—i.e. grammar and punctuation, single-paragraph essay test responses, summaries, multiple-paragraph essay test responses, and five-paragraph essays. I worked with four students per fifty minute session,

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three sessions per week. Moving from one module to the next required passing a post-test (graded by the faculty who, in many cases, graded tests for students they never saw), and students could take anywhere from two to six weeks to complete a module. Students worked at their own pace, which in practice meant they kept taking post-tests until they passed them. Students, therefore, could finish the course in one semester or two; those who took two were considered to be the remedial students. In my dealings with students, I was given strict syllabi to follow and was told to the letter what to do. As a part-time instructor in the same program, I was the one who graded the post-tests but went one step further than most of the other instructors by working individually with those students who were having the most difficulty getting through the modules—that is, the remedial students. This one-on-one work was the closest thing to basic writing training I received.

My introduction to basic writing

At this point in my career, I had never heard the term "basic writing"; it was only through my first readings of the MLA Job List that I became aware of the term as well as of the teaching of basic writing as a career choice. As a new full-time teacher of "developmental writing" with no guidelines or syllabi provided, I turned to textbooks to guide my syllabus and organize my semester. I was enthusiastic and happy to be employed, but I began my four-course load of basic writing with little sense of the reasons behind what I was doing; I depended on the textbooks to provide that for me.

I offer this "unheroic" history not as an example of an extreme case of pedagogical neglect or as an example of "how things used to be" but just the opposite—as a very typical example of the way that basic writing was taught and continues to be taught in all too many classrooms. Not many schools offer much more training for basic writing teachers than I received, and even fewer offer anything resembling coursework to teach graduate students to teach basic writing. Many times what training that is done is a whole lot of "what to do" without much by way of "why." Because little training on either practical or theoretical levels exists for college teachers of basic writing, many teachers turn to textbooks for guidance and method. In other words, the textbook becomes the authority. But when teachers turn to textbooks what do they find? How do the textbooks imagine and construct the student? How do they describe and name students and their work habits, goals, and desires? What kind of work do they ask students to do, and what problems do they anticipate as students attempt that work? Finally, what is the student to achieve if the work is carried through?

In the remainder of this paper, I will look into the claims of how success and progress occur as they are given in selected, contemporary basic writing textbooks. There are an overwhelming number of basic writing textbooks on the market that publishers' representatives include under the category of basic writing; however, there are few that attempt much beyond what Robert J. Connors calls "rule dependency." In his essay "Basic Writing Textbooks: History and Current Avatars," he writes:

> These books reflect a basic writing community that has not progressed nearly as much as a reading of the professional books and journals might indicate; the basic writing classes that most of these books reflect are sloughs of drudgery, overwork, and ignorance that are painful to contemplate. (386)

A quick glance at the *HarperCollins English Titles for 1996* reveals that little has changed as textbooks marketed specifically for basic writing are categorized under the heading "Developmental Skills," offering little challenge to Connors' charge of textbooks' failure to connect with contemporary theory as they make use of terms such as "essential" and "springboard" and "developing."

For the purposes of this study, I examined six textbooks from a variety of publishers—not in order to make a claim for a representative sample but to provide a sense of the ways that basic writing and basic writing students are represented. The basic writing textbooks I examined are Susan Fawcett and Alvin Sandberg's *Evergreen with Readings: A Guide to Writing* (1992); Fawcett and Sandberg's *Grassroots: The Writer's Workbook* (1991); Pamela Gay's *Developing Writers: A Dialogic Approach* (1992); Teresa Ferster Glazier's *The Least You Should Know About English: Basic Writing* (1994); Malcolm Kiniry and Mike Rose's *Critical Strategies for Academic Writing* (1990); and Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell's *Basic College Writing* (1982). I have selected this particular group of texts for a number of reasons. As teacher of basic writing, I taught from earlier editions of the books by Fawcett and Sandberg, Glazier, and Kirszner and Mandell. I have included Gay and Kiniry and Rose's textbooks because they attempt to offer alternatives to the workbook/skills approaches that have been the thrust of most basic writing textbooks and because Mike Rose has been such an influential figure in the field of basic writing. I'll be including one other textbook although I am not counting it officially as a seventh book because it is out of print. But I want to offer brief descriptions of Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller's *Becoming a Writer* because at the time of its 1986 publication they were the editors of the *Journal of Basic Writing* and because I think it worth noting that their book, one that attempts to make students self-conscious writers through cognitive and metacognitive writing assignments, did not prove popular enough to require a second edition whereas Glazier's *The Least You should Know about English*, a fill-in-the-blank workbook of exercises, continues to be used.

How the textbooks define their audience

Describing their audience, five of the seven books include the fear of error as a characteristic of their audience. Another common description of the basic writing student is as someone unclear as to what the role of a writer is and what work a writer does; that lack of clarity then lends itself to the student's developing "negative" attitudes toward writing. For example, the authors of *Grassroots* write:

> Since basic writing students may bring to your classroom negative attitudes about English class and about their own abilities, you may need to fight the "I can't write" attitude by helping students see that their reluctance is the cause of writing problems rather than the result of them. (*Grassroots* xvii)

Assuming that their audience will not understand that the ability to write takes a great deal of hard work, Kirszner and Mandell in *Basic College Writing* assure the student that "[c]ontrary to popular opinion, a knowledge of how to write well is not something that comes naturally. It's a skill that most people have to work to develop" (xiii). Two of these textbooks, however, resist a characterization that

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emphasizes students' reluctance to take on the role of the writer. Pamela Gay's *Developing Writers*, for instance, stresses that it addresses students as writers rather than victims" (xi). Kiniry and Rose's *Critical Strategies for Academic Writing* describes its audience as students "from those entering community college to those enrolled in upper-division university courses"—who struggle with the particular and peculiar demands of academic discourse (v). For Kiniry and Rose, it is not that students resist those demands but that they have not been acquainted with this kind of work before.

Motives for producing these textbooks include a common frustration with other textbooks. Glazier, for example, identifies one of the reasons for her textbook *The Least You Should Know About English* as being to help students by cutting out all but the most needed rules and guidelines for writing; she writes "Most English textbooks try to teach you as much as they can. This one will teach you the least it can—and still help you to write acceptably" (2). Bernhardt and Miller's *Becoming a Writer* complains about other textbooks that are so "full of rules, models, and advice that our attention is distracted from real writing" (v). Kiniry and Rose's *Critical Strategies* also expresses frustration with the "formulaic approaches and static models" of other textbooks (vi). Another motive identified by two of the seven is enabling students to succeed not only in the classroom but also on the job. Fawcett and Sandberg in *Evergreen* state that their book is "designed for students who need to improve the writing skills so necessary to succeed in college and most careers" (xi). Glazier's textbook identifies Standard English as essential to college and career (3).

Defining success

Success is also described on the local level of the student's experience with the textbooks themselves. Glazier's *The Least You Should Know*, Kirszner and Mandell's *Basic College Writing*, and Fawcett and Sandberg's *Evergreen* share "clarity" as a sign of successful completion of the book's work. Glazier, for example, states, "What you'll learn from this book is simply to make your writing so clear that no one will misunderstand it" (3). The "clear thesis sentence," "clearly stated topic sentences," and "clear plans" are goals for both of Fawcett and Sandberg's books, along with the development of a "positive attitude" toward writing. The work that will produce this success is largely exercise work. Glazier warns her audience to complete every exercise, even after they feel that they have mastered the particular skill, so that their practice will produce habit and consistency. Kirszner and Mandell offer "a tool, a method, a step-by-step approach" that breaks paragraphs and essays down into discrete and easily identifiable parts which students can reproduce so that paragraphs and essays are produced by means of exercises (xiii).

More ambitious is Bernhardt and Miller's *Becoming a Writer* which declares as one of its expectations that the successful students will "find pleasure in becoming a writer" (4) and that pleasure will result from "your own efforts and intelligence without the need to absorb someone else's opinions or to imitate their experiences" (1). The emphasis here shifts from a certain mechanical and/or organizational "clarity" above (clear, unambiguous sentences and paragraphs) to something much more difficult to assess and measure—pleasure in the intellectual labor of writing. Gay echoes this shift in *Developing Writers:* "This is exciting work. The ways of writing, thinking, and knowing that you will learn through this dialogic process will help you both learn to write and write to learn your way across the curriculum" (4). Similarly, Rose and Kiniry state their desire to "encourage critical reflection, that is intellectually unpredictable and vital" (vii).

Within this group of textbooks, the work that produces success does not lend itself to easy categorization. In *Developing Writers*, Gay, for example, has organized her textbook into sections that move from prewriting to personal experience to argument and persuasion. Each chapter asks students to integrate reading and writing in the work they do for that chapter. For instance, the topic of animal rights in Part III provides the basis from which written argument and analysis are demonstrated as students write "position letters" to the National Association of Biology Teachers. Bernhardt and Miller's *Becoming a Writer* looks like (and is) a workbook, but the difference between it and Glazier's book is that the former continually requires that students write, then reflect on what, how, and why they have written. They fill in blanks, but those blanks largely follow questions that ask them to step back from their writing in order to examine it as writing, writing that conveys meaning, rather than grammatically correct writing. For example:

> 1. How did you feel while doing this exercise?
>
> 2. Compare your impressions of the work in this exercise with the other exercises you have done so far in this book. (Bernhardt and Miller 38)

Kiniry and Rose's *Critical Strategies* demands the most from its audience, who is asked to read a range of styles of academic texts and produce written analysis, at the same time that the textbook introduces its audience to the particularities of differing academic discourses—literature, science, history, political science, and so on. Students not only work to read and analyze a variety of readings but also work to read them according to the ways that knowledge is defined and valued in these different fields.

Success for all of these last three textbooks can be read in terms of empowerment. Students are not only to learn skills but also to learn to reflect in meaningful and critical ways on what they read and write. They are not only to learn to write with greater ease and clarity but to find pleasure and stimulation from the act. For Glazier, Fawcett and Sandberg, and Kirszner and Mandell, however, success is largely conceived in formal terms of grammatical and organizational correctness. It is error that disrupts the basic writing student's efforts to communicate; eliminating error, therefore, is what is needed. The work imagined for students allows these textbooks to be divided crudely according to how they define success. This division is not a matter of barely distinguishable difference; it is, instead, a wide division which affects how students will be perceived in the institution at large as well as in the classroom.

Success for basic writing students in these textbooks may be perceived in terms of skills versus empowerment. For books such as Glazier's or Kirszner and Mandell's, successful students are prepared for the "real" work to come in "real" college courses and in the "real" work of employment. The work they do in the basic writing class is only preparatory; it is not valuable in itself; it is not "real." Other textbooks for contemporary basic writing students see themselves as "empowering" students to do critical work and to find ways to take intellectual pleasure in that work. But the desire to empower

does not escape assumptions that operate alongside that desire. And, ultimately, neither perception figures its audience as thinking adults, capable of "real" work and of naming their own terms of empowerment.

Relationships of power, knowledge, and authority are mapped onto institutions, textbooks, teachers, and students as they operate within (and against) the narratives we construct. The "narrative of literacy" each textbook tells will affect what the students can expect to achieve by successfully completing the work of the book. Rather than reading only "for content" or "with the grain" of the textbooks they consider and adopt, teachers need to read "against the grain" of these narratives as well because they reveal how contemporary basic writing textbooks construct students and the work they are to do, enacting their assumptions regarding who these people are, what they can be expected to know, what kind of work can be expected from them, and what the terms of success can be.

There is no perfect textbook that will liberate or empower its readers on its own. However, authors and publishers of textbooks need to move away from practices and attitudes that predate the Dartmouth Seminar and begin to serve an avant garde function, testing and "transcending the boundaries" of the field of basic writing, re-imagining their audience as a consequence. Because basic writing textbooks continue to stand as tangible representations of the field and offer training for many teachers of basic writing, basic writing textbooks in particular and especially should reflect and enact this complexity. In other words, basic writing courses and textbooks need to be designed and written so that they produce a narrative of the intellectually, developmentally, cognitively, and emotionally capable and, most importantly, literate adult.

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NEWSLETTER FOR WRITING TEACHERS

New federally-funded research center taking broad approach to studying English teaching

The National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy

National Research Center on Literature Teaching & Learning
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY • SUNY

Feds end funding for centers studying topics within English and establish larger centers with broader missions; new English center is at SUNY/Albany

Centers losing federal funding

Bill McCleary

The federal government has ended its support for the Center for the Study of Writing headquartered at the University of California at Berkeley and has funded a new, larger center that will take a broader look at English teaching. The new center is called the National Research Center on Student Learning and Achievement in English (CSLA) and is located at the State University of New York at Albany. Assistance and collaboration will be provided by several other universities. The primary collaborator is the University of Wisconsin-Madison; others to be involved are the University of Oklahoma and the University of Washington.

The new center replaces not only the Center for the Study of Writing but also the National Research Center on Literature Teaching & Learning, which was also located at SUNY/Albany. Two of the directors of the literature center, Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer, are directing the new center, along with Martin Nystrand of Wisconsin-Madison.

CSLA is part of a plan by the Department of Education to establish large research centers with broad mandates. Earlier this year, the Department

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